

CHAPTER 9

Pagan Traditions: Sacralizing the Body

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And ye shall be free from slavery; and as a sign that ye are really free, ye shall be naked in your rites; and ye shall dance, sing, feast, make music and love, all in my praise....

I, who am the beauty of the green earth, and the white Moon among the stars, and the mystery of the waters, and the heart's desire, call unto thy soul....

Let my worship be within the heart that rejoiceth, for behold: all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals.

—from the Wiccan liturgy “The Charge of the Goddess” by Doreen Valiente

“All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals”: this powerful statement of the holiness of embodiment has drawn many people to contemporary Pagan traditions since the mid-twentieth century. Its source, “The Charge of the Goddess,” was composed by twentieth-century British Wiccan priestess Doreen Valiente (1922–1999). When Wicca reached the United States in the 1960s and mixed with the American feminist, environmental, and gay rights efforts, a countercultural religious movement was born that continues to attract sexual minorities and others seeking a religion that sacralizes the body and sexuality.

Today, Pagan communities are much more accepting of marginalized expressions of sexuality and gender than most mainstream religions. With its reputation for radical sex- and body-positivity, contemporary Paganism has often been praised for empowering women and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) people as individuals and as leaders. In most Pagan traditions, people of all genders and sexualities can become clergy, and many communities have developed blessings for same-sex and polyamorous (multiple-partner) relationships. Many Pagans are also at least tentatively accepting of BDSM (bondage, domination/submission, sadomasochism), which is seen as a tool for ecstatic spiritual practice and a potentially healthy erotic activity.

EMBODIMENT IS MORE THAN SEXUALITY

Like others in the English-speaking world, Pagans associate embodiment strongly with sensuality or sexuality. Many see sexuality as central to their identities, something that reveals a core truth of their spiritual selves. Yet religious studies scholar Megan Goodwin

points out that the very notion of a sexual identity only goes back to the nineteenth century. In “Thinking Sex and American Religions” (2011), Goodwin emphasizes that the oversignification of sexuality is both typical of contemporary Westerners and relatively new. Our cultural obsession with sexual matters, including politicized aspects such as reproductive rights and same-sex marriage, often overshadow equally weighty issues of international relations, environment, and economics and are unique to our historical moment. As Goodwin states, scholars also perpetuate this trend by emphasizing sexuality over other aspects of embodiment, such as race, age, health, location, and the material conditions of life.

This chapter will not succeed in balancing sexuality evenly with all other aspects of embodiment, and this is at least partially because Pagans’ intense interest in sexuality and the erotic provides rich material in these areas. However, Pagan theologies also include religious approaches to race, gender, health, and relationship with the natural world, and these aspects of embodiment will not be neglected.

PAGANISM IS MORE THAN WICCA

Although we are beginning our discussion of contemporary Paganism with Wiccan liturgy, to put Wicca uncritically at the center of contemporary Pagan history can obscure the enormous diversity of the Pagan movement. Pagan communities include non-Wiccan witches, who may practice regional folk magic inherited from their families or neighbors; feminist Goddess worshippers; ecologically focused Pagans such as Gaia worshippers and animists; Pagans who focus on gay, lesbian, queer, or transgender identity, such as the Radical Faeries; and reconstructionist or semi-reconstructionist Pagans such as Asatru (or Heathens) and Druids, who are attempting to accurately reconstruct ancient religions.

Historically, *pagan* has had a variety of meanings. In its vernacular usage previous to the contemporary Pagan movement, it most commonly referred to indigenous or pre-Christian religions. The term ultimately derives from the Latin *paganus*, which in ancient times could mean either “non-Christian” or “country dweller.” Contemporary Pagans have embraced the word as a uniting term for all those seeking to revive or reconstruct ancient indigenous religions. Additionally, nature-focused Pagans have interpreted “country dweller” as “one who follows country ways”—in other words, ways of life based on natural agricultural cycles. In reality, *paganus* to the Romans was likely derogatory, meaning something like “redneck”; but even this meaning has been appealing to some Pagans today, especially those distancing themselves from what they perceive as consumer culture’s excesses.

WHO IS A PAGAN?

The majority of the communities that self-identify as contemporary Pagan (or, sometimes, neo-Pagan) are mostly English-speaking, white, middle-class, urban groups within the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia in which Wicca has a significant influence. Brazil also hosts a large community of non-English-speaking Wiccans and Goddess worshippers, and there are many smaller Wiccan communities around the world.

Attempts to define *Pagan* in terms other than self-identity are always contentious. For example, although some practitioners of Afro-Caribbean traditions such as Haitian Vodou, New Orleans Voodoo, Santería, or Candomblé consider themselves to be Pagan (and some self-identified Pagans seek out and study these traditions), others reject the label because of its association with what they see as oppressive white capitalist culture. (For recent research on sexuality and embodiment in Afro-Caribbean traditions, see Hutchins and Williams 2012.)



Further complicating the issue of Pagan identity are revivals of native religions occurring in northern Europe, eastern Europe, the Baltic states, and other parts of the former Soviet Union. Though these groups may use the term *Pagan* for themselves when writing in English, some define Paganism as inherently nationalistic or tribal. These practitioners are sometimes dismissive toward the contemporary Pagan movement, which they may see as commodified and detached from any particular land or ethnic culture. These international Paganisms are difficult to make generalizations about, both because they are rooted in distinctive national contexts, and because the body of English-language research about them is still relatively small. (Interested readers should see Aitamurto and Simpson 2014.)

Scholarly definitions of contemporary Paganism usually exclude the indigenous religions of Africa, North and South America, Asia, and Australia, as these religions have their own self-identifiers and have entirely different historical and cultural origins.

WHAT DO CONTEMPORARY PAGANS SHARE IN COMMON?

To make all this diversity manageable, we will be focusing on self-described, English-speaking Pagans. According to Pew Forum numbers, there are around one million self-identified Pagans in the United States today, the largest such population within a single country. As we will see, even among English-speaking Pagans, there are substantial differences between Pagan traditions and between individuals in those traditions—not to mention among the large numbers of eclectic Pagans who may practice multiple traditions or no traditions at all.

In spite of this variety, certain attitudes appear frequently among Pagans; it is fair to say that most Pagans will hold most of them. These commonalities include:

- A belief that the divine is immanent (fully present) in the material world, and that nature, the body, and sexuality are sacred;
- The practice of honoring multiple deities, sometimes as separate beings, and sometimes as archetypes or aspects of a Goddess or a God or both;
- Trust in personal experience as a source of divine knowledge;
- Complex ritual practice, which may include extensive liturgies, dancing, drumming, making offerings, building altars, and more;
- Reference to pre-Christian myths and traditions or indigenous traditions as authentic sources of inspiration for belief and practice;
- Acknowledgement of the principles of magic (sometimes spelled *magick* to differentiate it from stage magic or the magic of fantasy fiction), the belief that ritual acts performed with intention can alter consciousness, and therefore, reality;

- Virtue ethics, an approach to decision making that focuses on values and relationships rather than on inflexible rules;
- Religious pluralism, the belief that other religious traditions are potentially as legitimate as one's own.

ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY PAGANISM

It is common to follow well-known British scholar Ronald Hutton by beginning contemporary Pagan history with the immediate precursors of Wicca. In *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999), Hutton locates the origins of Wicca primarily within the past few hundred years, though he allows for the possibility of some ancient connections. For those who believe that contemporary Paganism is an authentic revival of ancient European and Mediterranean religions, however, Hutton's narrative is unsatisfying. Some simply believe that Wicca is overemphasized in the history of contemporary Paganism; others object to Hutton's portrayal of Wicca as a new religious movement. Yet it has been difficult to prove whether any European communities have been practicing a polytheistic, earth-centered, or Goddess-honoring religion since ancient times without that religion either syncretizing with Christianity or being downgraded to secular folk or cultural practices.

The assumption that folk practices are inherently secular, however, is perhaps an error of modern thinking. To many ancient peoples, there was no clear boundary between culture, religion, and tribal or ethnic identity. It is questionable, therefore, to approach folk practices such as seasonal festivals as being clearly secular; and if we do see such practices as potentially religious, then there may yet be good evidence for unbroken Pagan practice in Europe from ancient times.

ORIGINS OF PAGAN THEOLOGIES OF EMBODIMENT: LITERARY AND ARTISTIC SOURCES

Literary and intellectual movements of the nineteenth century were important forerunners of contemporary Pagan attitudes toward embodiment. As Chas Clifton has argued in *Sacred Lands and Spiritual Landscapes* (2014), Romanticism was both an important precursor to contemporary Paganism and continues to inform it today. The movement emphasized intuition and emotion as sources of authentic knowledge over the use of reason, and writers such as William Blake (1757–1827) and Walt Whitman (1819–1892) reevaluated the role of the body in spirituality by celebrating sensation, sexuality, and ecstatic experience. Poets such as John Keats (1795–1821), Lord Byron (1788–1824), and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) also mined Greco-Roman myth and British and European folklore for their work; the Greek gods, faery beings, and ancestral spirits that are now part of Pagan religious culture became popular subject matter for literature.

In the United States, the Romantic movement spawned Transcendentalism, an anti-institutional intellectual movement that advocated for the innate goodness of nature and humanity. Though originating in the Unitarian church, the movement caught the interest of the broader public through the work of writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), who emphasized self-reliance and

connection with the natural world. Also in the United States, the late nineteenth century saw early advocacy for the preservation of the American wilderness. Influential preservationists such as John Muir (1838–1914) argued passionately for the spiritual and practical importance of relationship with nature. These movements in the United States and British Isles together laid a foundation for a nature-centered, polytheistic religious movement that embraced intuitive ways of knowing and sought spiritual knowledge through the body.

ORIGINS OF PAGAN THEOLOGIES OF EMBODIMENT: THERAPEUTIC SPIRITUALITIES

As Catherine Albanese describes in *Nature Religion in America* (1990), nineteenth- and twentieth-century therapeutic religious movements (including New Thought, Christian Science, and others) focused on physical and spiritual healing as a primary goal of their practice. These movements in Europe, the British Isles, and the United States influenced contemporary Pagan attitudes toward the body.

Some of these therapeutic spiritual approaches hold that disease is caused by a disruption in the individual's natural state, whether spiritual, physical, or both. Believing that a divine life energy is immanent in nature and in the human body, such therapies seek to restore the body's natural energy flow and harmony with nature. Some of these spiritually grounded therapies continue to be used today, including osteopathy and chiropractic, which try to correct the flow of life energy through skeletal and muscular manipulations; homeopathy, which uses a model of natural harmony between the cause of disease and its cure; and the natural food movement, which sees heavy processing and the application of chemicals as diminishing the nourishing quality of food (in other words, its ability to transfer life force). The underlying idea behind these therapies, that all living things share a vital life energy, is generally referred to as *vitalism*.

In *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* (2006), Chas S. Clifton documents the influence of vitalist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957). Hostile toward authoritarianism and patriarchy, Reich was a popular writer among contemporary Pagans of the 1970s. He taught that when emotional or other dysfunctions blocked the flow of *orgone* (his term for life force) in the body, mental and physical disease would result. In Reich's theory, orgone could be transmitted from body to body through touch, and it could be built up and released through sexual activity and orgasm. In Reich's system, therefore, physical pleasure was considered essential for health. For Pagans, Reich's vitalism provided semiscientific support for their experiences of immanent divine energy and sacred sexuality.

Vitalistic beliefs also informed the practice of naturism, or nudism, which gained a following in Europe and the United States in the early to mid-twentieth century. Spending time nude in natural settings was thought to help restore the body's natural harmonies and encourage health. This activity was not understood as sexual, but rather as promoting personal and social freedom, because the act of removing clothes obscured signs of social rank. Through Gerald Gardner's (1884–1964) interest in naturism, Wicca gained the practice of ritual nudity (which he called "going skyclad," a term he may have learned from Jainism during his travels in the East). Naturism also appealed to others attracted to nature

religion and philosophies of personal freedom, and the practice was already an established part of the counterculture when Wicca made its way to the United States in the 1960s.

ORIGINS OF PAGAN THEOLOGIES OF EMBODIMENT: WESTERN ESOTERICISM

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western esotericism was a major influence on the development of Wicca, and it has continued to be a resource for Pagan traditions that practice magic. Esoteric practices, sometimes referred to as the Western mystery tradition or Western occultism, were developed in formal lodge settings that often attracted the wealthy and the educated and artistic elite.

Drawing on the Eastern practice of Tantra as well as from Western esoteric sources, practitioners of Western esotericism engaged in sex magic for a variety of purposes. These practices, often done in private, could involve explicit sex acts, but at other times they were more like ritual dramas that explored various erotic forces, such as the spiritual relationships between genders. Like their contemporary Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), these esotericists believed that the repression of human sexual instincts caused a variety of pathologies. Sexual ritual was employed as a way to release blocked life force, resolve pathologies, and create greater personal freedom. As Hugh Urban shows in *Magia Sexualis* (2006), however, the aims of these Victorian and early twentieth-century sex magicians were not limited to the individual. Many sought sexual liberation because they believed it would be the basis of a wider social and political liberation movement, one that would be free of gender-based and racial oppression.

Esotericists Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and Dion Fortune (1890–1946) both had significant influences on contemporary Pagan thinking about gender and sexuality. Crowley headed the magical lodge best known for sex magic, the Ordo Templi Orientis, and both Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente adapted his work for Wiccan ritual and liturgy. In Crowley's best-known ritual, the gnostic mass, a priestess and priest embody feminine and masculine divine energies that interact erotically, reflecting the primordial movement of universal forces. Crowley was a conflicted figure, simultaneously misogynistic and worshipful toward female bodies and women's sexuality. Nevertheless, many feminist magicians today continue to find empowerment in his images of a powerful, fierce, and shamelessly sexual Goddess (sometimes imaged as the Whore of Babylon).

Dion Fortune's influence on contemporary Paganism came mainly through her occult novels, particularly *The Sea Priestess* (1938) and *Moon Magic* (1956, published posthumously). Though Fortune considered herself to be a Christian for much of her life, embodying the energies of ancient Pagan deities (understood as god-forms) was part of her magical work. Her novels contain powerful poetry and images that Pagans have drawn on for Goddess worship, particularly for devotion to the Egyptian goddess Isis. Fortune was also one of many esotericists to sacralize gender and sexuality, though in a way that largely reinforced traditional gender roles. Fortune saw human souls as inherently masculine or feminine and as holding complementary energies. These energies, she believed, could be embodied by a priest and priestess in magical workings that could change the course of participants' lives.

Fortune's sacralization of egalitarian heterosexual partnership echoes the work of black American occultist Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875), who was active half a century earlier. Randolph was an advocate of sex magic and of the sanctity of marriage, as well as an

abolitionist and proponent of women's rights. For both Randolph and Fortune, bringing men and women into right relation through embodied esoteric practice was part of working toward a just society.

PROTO-PAGANISMS AND PARALLEL DEVELOPMENTS

The first half of the twentieth century saw a number of proto-Pagan movements and publications. Two of the most influential works were Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), an enormous study of comparative mythology; and Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* (1948), a semi-scholarly mythopoetic work celebrating the Mother Goddess.

In some cases, proto-Paganisms developed in tandem with movements emphasizing the rights of sexual minorities. For example, in 1920s Germany, gay and lesbian communities flourished under the Weimar Republic and evolved fascinatingly gender-variant spiritualities. Influenced by the works of Plato, the Theosophical Society, and more, the group of authors behind the journal *Die Freundschaft* saw Eros as their patron, believed that one could discover one's soul in nature, and embraced a theology of reincarnation in which the soul's development depends on incarnating into the bodies of different sexes.

Americans inspired by *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess* also birthed their own self-consciously religious movements, such as Gleb Botkin's (1900–1969) Church of Aphrodite (founded in New York in 1938) and Feraferia, originally formed in 1957 by Frederick Adams (1928–2008) as the Fellowship of Hesperides. These groups practiced nature-centered Goddess worship. Though they were small, their vision of a cosmic, ecstatic theology of nature influenced the wider Pagan movement through their magazine publications (see Clifton 2006). Particularly in Feraferia, the purpose of ritual practice was to seek erotic union with nature, through which one can experience the Divine Feminine as the source of being.

WHY WICCA?

Why did Wicca end up at the center of the contemporary Pagan movement rather than one of these other groups evolving in the same period? Part of the answer is the success of its marketing.

Gerald Gardner was the first major publicizer of Wicca. He claimed to have been initiated into a witch coven that was a remnant of an ancient indigenous European religion. The witches, he said, were permitting him to speak about Wicca at that time because they feared that their religion was finally going to die out. During the 1950s, Gardner published several books on the so-called witch cult. His best-known work, *Witchcraft Today* (1954), contains a forward by then-celebrated anthropologist Margaret Murray (1863–1963), who lent Gardner's work academic credibility.

In the 1960s, a Wiccan initiate named Alex Sanders (1926–1988) courted the media with even more success. With the beautiful young Maxine (1946–), Sanders's wife, acting as his high priestess, Sanders appeared on British talk shows and in a variety of sensationalized films on modern witches and magic. He also arranged for the publication of his biography, the heavily embroidered *King of the Witches* (Johns 1970). These books, films, articles, and other materials made their way across the Atlantic, where they found fertile ground in the



Wiccans around a cauldron. *Wicca ended up at the center of the contemporary Pagan movement in part through successful marketing at the hands of such figures as Gerald Gardner and Alex Sanders, both from England. Books, films, articles, and other materials by and about Sanders made their way across the Atlantic, where they found fertile ground in the American counterculture revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s.* © PAULRUCKERART.COM.

American counterculture revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s. With movements for sexual freedom, environmentalism, women's liberation, and other social reforms already in full swing, a religion that celebrated nature, sexuality, and women's power seemed a perfect fit.

Although Gardner's ethnographies of witchcraft are now thought to be largely fictionalized, at the time he had the backing of a respected academic and a publisher that could effectively distribute his work. Gardner sought out journalists to spread his message, and the charismatic Sanders engaged film and popular television, mass mediums that could broadcast titillating images of strange rituals, mysterious costumes, and just-barely-obscured nude bodies to large audiences.

"ALL ACTS OF LOVE AND PLEASURE"

Although the long reach of Wicca had much to do with its being the first widely publicized Pagan tradition, part of its staying power is attributable to Doreen Valiente, the talented

poet who served as Gardner's high priestess in the early 1950s. As she relates in *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* (1989), Valiente edited the liturgical materials that Gardner had collected, in particular rewriting passages taken verbatim from the work of the infamous magician Aleister Crowley. Valiente also wrote a great deal of new material for seasonal celebrations, some of which Gardner presented to the public as if it were of ancient origin. Valiente eventually broke from her mentor, but not before compiling the best-known piece of contemporary Pagan liturgy today, "The Charge of the Goddess," which is excerpted at the beginning of this chapter.

"The Charge of the Goddess" articulates many common contemporary Pagan attitudes about embodiment. The text is generally recited in Wiccan ritual by a priestess who is embodying the presence of the Goddess. In it, participants are instructed to worship nude as a sign of physical and spiritual freedom, as well as to "dance, sing, feast, make music and love" as acts of devotion to their deity. Sensual, sexual, and body-focused practices are framed as central aspects of the tradition. The Charge also outlines the relationship between the Goddess and the material world. The Wiccan Goddess is fully present within nature, but also beyond it and encompassing it:

Hear ye the words of the Star Goddess, she in the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven; whose body encircleth the Universe; I, who am the beauty of the green earth, and the white Moon among the stars, and the mystery of the waters, and the heart's desire, call unto thy soul. (Valiente)

The Charge presents the Goddess as "Mother of All Living," a nurturing figure whose "Law is Love unto all Beings." The holiness of free enjoyment of the body is reiterated and amplified: "All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals," says the Goddess in a frequently quoted line that sexual revolutionaries have embraced. Valiente's text portrays a deity who is as intimate with her worshippers as they are with their own bodies, yet also cosmic in her being. For many Wiccans and Pagans, it is the Charge that first suggested that access to divinity could be as close as their flesh.

PAGAN SEXUAL ETHICS

Many Wiccans see "The Charge of the Goddess" as supporting progressive sexual ethics. If "all acts of love and pleasure" are holy, they reason, then all erotic activities that adults engage in with enthusiastic consent are permitted. This theology has led to a greater acceptance of same-sex relationships, polyamorous relationships, and BDSM practice than one finds in the population at large.

Of these, polyamory in particular has enjoyed a special link with Paganism. In her essay "A Bouquet of Lovers" (1990), Morning Glory Zell (1948–2014) coined the term *polyamorous* to describe the ethically nonmonogamous relationships practiced by the Church of All Worlds, a Pagan group inspired partially by Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). Though polyamory is still a minority practice among Pagans, it is common for Pagan festivals and groups to include affinity groups for polyamorous families or instructional talks on successfully negotiating nonmonogamy.

Pagans today continue to model their expansive sexual ethics through ritual. Since the 2000s, this emphasis on sexual liberation has been accompanied by increasingly sophisticated thinking about boundaries and consent. For example, Douglas Ezzy's *Sex,*

Death, and Witchcraft (2014) studies an Australian Pagan festival that takes participants through a transformative ritual process of ego-death, transformation, and integration through erotic connection. The festival's climactic ritual is a devotional ritual for Baphomet, a hermaphroditic Pagan deity of taboo erotic desire. In interviews, the organizers and participants reflect thoughtfully on the hard work of creating a highly emotionally and erotically charged ritual while maintaining good consent practices around touch. The festival illustrates both the continuing centrality of sexuality in Pagan thinking, as well as evolving Pagan thought about the fluidity of gender.

GENDER IN WICCA

Many people today think of Wicca as a Goddess-focused religion. However, Wicca, as Gardner and Sanders talked about it in the 1950s and 1960s, put equal or even greater emphasis on the figure of the Horned God, a masculine deity of fertility and the hunt. Since that time, Wicca's approach to gender has evolved continuously.

Traditional Wiccans—those whose practice holds closely to the teachings of Gardner or Sanders—often see the Wiccan Goddess and God as complementary opposites. In ritual, they may emphasize the concept of gender polarity, the idea that a primal energy is generated when an intuitive, receptive, lunar, feminine force interacts with a rational, active, solar, masculine one. For many Wiccans, gender polarity is what gives potency to the Great Rite. In this ritual, the Goddess is invoked upon a priestess and the God upon a priest. The priestess and priest then engage in a symbolic union, one that is thought to both recall the creation of the universe and allow the participants to experience its ongoing unfolding. The Great Rite can be performed with a blade or wand being inserted into a cup, symbolizing active and receptive forces; or it can be performed as a sexual act, where the priest acts as the active God and the priestess as the receptive Goddess.

Some Wiccans are insistent that the Goddess role be played by a feminine, female-bodied person and the God role be played by a masculine, male-bodied person. Without the proper physical vessels in the form of a priestess and priest, they believe, the deities will not be fully present, or may refuse to manifest at all. This view is informed by gender essentialism, the notion that gender is fundamentally biological, and that certain human characteristics come more naturally to one sex or the other—for example, the belief that intuition is essentially feminine and rationality is essentially masculine. Others believe that masculinity and femininity are spiritual and psychological forces that exist within everyone, regardless of biological sex. Still others see gender as an arbitrary result of social conditioning, with no basis in biology whatsoever (this view is termed *gender constructivism*). In covens that include LGBTQ members, participants may choose ritual roles without being restricted by their gender identity or biological sex. Rather than speaking of polarity, they may speak of primal energy as the erotic, a potent creative force that can arise between any two or more beings. These covens may also emphasize traditional Wiccan liturgy with images of androgynous or hermaphroditic deity. (For details on the queer aspects of traditional Wicca and Western esotericism, see Aburrow 2014.) For all these Wiccans, however, the human body is the most important magical tool of all because it is the body that can express the energy of the invited deities.

Not all forms of Wicca work with the God or masculine gods. Particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, feminist women and men came to Wicca desperate for images of feminine deities.

Many of these Wiccans found what they were looking for in the powerful lines of Valiente's Charge, and the development of Goddess-centered forms of Wicca became possible.

SPIRITUAL FEMINISMS

Feminist Paganisms were part of the explosion of feminist spirituality in the 1970s, particularly in the United States. Spiritual feminism sought to complement political feminism through transforming the consciousness of individual women. Like the feminist spirituality movement as a whole, feminist Paganisms focused on empowering female leadership, creating positive images of normal female bodies, raising the status of traditionally feminine roles (such as giving birth and nurturing children), and developing a sense of female identity independent from relationships with men.

Many of the ideas and images used in this process were mined from ancient religions. Mythology showed goddesses playing a wide variety of roles: goddesses of war, hearth and home, beauty, sex, rulership, and more. Myths from *The White Goddess* also found their way into the mix, often via Wicca: women worshipped the Triple Goddess with her aspects of Maiden, Mother, and Crone, and they used these images to sacralize the stages of their lives. For women experiencing menopause, spiritual feminists created croning rituals to celebrate the aging of the body and the increase of wisdom.

FEMINIST WITCHCRAFT

Many feminist Pagans embraced the word *witch* and called their practices *witchcraft* because of the connotations of taboo female power. Among these were Zsuzsanna (or "Z") Budapest (1940–), a Hungarian immigrant who founded the Susan B. Anthony Coven #1, the first visible women-only coven in the United States. She wrote the famous chant "We All Come from the Goddess," which is used widely in Pagan rituals around the world. Through her books and rituals for women, Budapest established a tradition she called Dianic Wicca, in which only the Goddess or goddesses are worshipped.

Dianic Wicca focuses heavily on women's mysteries—both the lived experience of menstruating and giving birth (which are framed as magical acts that connect one to the fertile Mother Goddess), and the experience of being socialized as a woman. Many Dianics take an essentialist view toward gender: for them, womanhood comes from the female body. Accordingly, Dianic rituals seek to heal and empower women through celebrating female bodies. Such rituals support participants in healing from sexual assault and abuse, as well as from body-shaming and sex-negative messages received through religion, families of origin, or the media. Menstruating women and menstrual blood are extremely taboo in many cultures, which Dianics interpret as a fear of women's power, especially their reproductive power. In Dianic Wicca, menstrual blood is considered magically powerful, and it is sometimes used as an offering to the Goddess or to anoint a ritual tool.

In the 1970s, Budapest was controversial for her rejection of masculine divinity and her legal struggle to make tarot card reading legal in California. Today, she remains a contentious figure for her exclusion of transgender women from women-only events. Her

work is an important example of how feminist Pagans have sacralized the female body and feminine gender in both a religious and political context.

Also significant in feminist witchcraft is Starhawk (1951–), a theologian, ritualist, activist, and teacher. In 1979, based on her training with American witches Victor Anderson (1917–2001) and Cora Anderson (1915–2008), she published the bestselling book *The Spiral Dance*. Along with Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979), a journalistic examination of contemporary Paganism, *The Spiral Dance* was many Pagans' first contact with the movement throughout the 1980s. Although Starhawk's theology is grounded in the feminist movement, her activism has been wide-ranging, with her recent work focusing on prison ministry, permaculture, and responses to climate change.

THE ART OF CHANGING CONSCIOUSNESS AT WILL

Witches and some other Pagans practice magic, which esotericist Dion Fortune famously defined as the art of changing consciousness at will. Magic aims at changing the mind—but its method of doing so begins and ends with the body. Magic is usually accomplished through ritual, a set of intentional acts designed to resonate with the unconscious parts of ourselves.

As Starhawk explains magic in *The Spiral Dance*, people communicate with the intuitive, primal, unconscious parts of themselves through images, sensory experiences, and physical actions, not through words or theory. She believes that without the participation of the unconscious, people become stuck in emotional and mental ruts, held back from using their power by traumas and negative conditioning. When the whole self is fully engaged, however, people become aware of their own divinity and of their dependence on each other as part of a complex, living ecosystem. From that place of fully engaged, divine knowing, change in consciousness becomes possible—and from change in consciousness, many Pagans believe, comes change in culture and in society.

THE BODY IN RITUAL

Whether for magical purposes or simply celebration, Pagan ritual stimulates the body with sensory experiences: not just sight and hearing, but also taste, touch, and smell. For example, in Druid traditions, participants often cleanse themselves for ritual by eliminating certain heavy foods from the day's diet and by taking a ceremonial bath. The ritual space may be prepared by making offerings of milk and honey to land spirits or deities and lighting a fire, and then the group may sing and process around the space to create a sacred center (focused on key symbols of Druidry, such as the world tree, the fire, and the well). During the ritual, participants may be blessed with incense or saltwater and share a ritual cup, and they may also make additional offerings of food or liquor to the spirits or deities being honored. Other Pagan rituals are more physically demanding: large festival rituals often involve drumming, singing, and ecstatic dancing around a bonfire; donning elaborate costumes, body paint, or masks, which may be intended to assist with embodying sacred forces; and building large, colorful altars with representations of deities or of the four elements (earth, air, water, and fire). Nearly all Pagan rituals end with a celebratory feast.

Feminist witches are deeply concerned with healing, and their rituals often include sacred touch practices. Some witches and Pagans are trained in Reiki, a healing touch practice originally from Japan, or in other energy healing systems that involve gently laying hands on another's body. Groups of witches might take turns laying healing hands on each other and speaking affirmations for healing from emotional or physical trauma. Other practices are more formal: in Wicca and other forms of witchcraft, participants give each other the "Five-Fold Kiss," a formal liturgy accompanied by kisses on the feet, knees, belly, chest, and lips.

Other common liturgies acknowledge each participant as an embodied spark of divinity. Some Pagans, for example, give the blessing "Thou art God" or "Thou Art Goddess" while ritually sharing a sacred cup. This blessing does not mean that the individual herself is a deity, but rather is one part of the divine's ongoing manifestation in flesh.

PAGAN ACTIVISM

For politically active Pagans, the immanence of the divine in the material world demands concrete action. Embodiment creates a holy obligation to take dreams of a just society and create them in the flesh. Flesh is where divinity manifests, and that belief informs activists' relationships with all aspects of society and the environment.

Starhawk is a cofounder of the Reclaiming tradition of witchcraft, a politically active form of witchcraft whose members have been involved in civil rights, anti-nuclear and anti-globalization campaigns, peace activism, and many other causes. Many feminist witches and other activist Pagans today are part of the permaculture movement, which develops methods of housing people and growing food that harmonize with the patterns of local ecosystems. Permaculture is, most simply, an attempt to form cultures that can be permanent—in other words, cultures that do not deplete or destroy their local environments, but which can maintain a healthful living situation for plants, animals, and humans indefinitely. Activism around permaculture is one significant way that Pagans live out their commitment to the earth.

ECO-PAGANISMS

Since at least the 1970s, many Pagans have been concerned about human beings' relationship with the natural environment. Ecologically focused Pagans of the 1970s and 1980s were influenced by the Gaia hypothesis developed by scientists Lynn Margulis



Greenman mask. Large festival-style Pagan rituals often involve drumming, singing, and ecstatic dancing around a bonfire; donning elaborate costumes, body paint, or masks, which may be intended to assist with embodying sacred forces. © LAUREN RAINE MFA 2015.

(1938–2011) and James Lovelock (1919–). Margulis and Lovelock theorized that the earth's inorganic matter and its organisms work together to maintain conditions for life. The result is an interdependent, self-regulating system, an integrated whole they dubbed *Gaia* after the Greek earth goddess. The Gaia theory provided a concrete way for Pagans to model their conviction that all living things are connected. Some took the theory even more literally, seeing it as evidence that the earth is a conscious being. Such thinking reinforced many Pagans' sense of obligation to fight back against the pollution of the natural environment and the destruction of plants and animals, all of which they saw as having consequences for human health.

The 1990s and 2000s saw the development of a new approach to ecospirituality that scholar Graham Harvey (1943–) has dubbed the New Animism. In anthropology, animism is attributed to many indigenous religions. It is a belief system in which animals, plants, places, and some inanimate objects are thought to have souls. Animism often also includes communication with ancestral or other spirits. In the New Animism, the belief in a soul is updated with a more modern notion of personhood: all these beings are considered as other-than-human persons to whom human persons have responsibilities. To speak of these beings as people is to recognize that they have rights and are deserving of protection and respect.

In contrast to the holistic, global thinking of Gaia theory, New Animist thinking focuses on personal, intimate relationships between beings. Like Gaia theory, however, it sees all things as interdependent: person-to-person relationships create an interconnected web throughout which help or harm resonates. Today, some Pagans identify primarily as animists and see relationship building with other-than-human persons as the primary purpose of their religious practice. Their approach is similar to Michael Harner's (1929–) core shamanism, a New Age practice that bases itself on perceived commonalities between indigenous traditions. Animist Pagans, however, may see their philosophy as more intellectually grounded and their practice as less guilty of cultural appropriation.

RECONSTRUCTIONIST AND SEMI-RECONSTRUCTIONIST PAGANISMS

Reconstructionist Paganisms attempt to accurately recreate the practice of ancient religions for the modern world. They include Druidry, Asatru or Heathenry (northern European Paganism), Hellenism (Greek Paganism), Kemetism (Egyptian Paganism), and others. Due to the perception that blanket definitions of Paganism overemphasize Wicca and therefore misrepresent their practices and beliefs, some practitioners in these groups identify primarily as polytheists rather than as Pagans. Although reconstructionists are a minority in the contemporary Pagan movement, many Pagans see studying historical religion as a way to make their practice more authentic. As a result, reconstructionisms have had an influential voice in the movement, particularly since the 1990s.

Reconstructionism can be a demanding scholarly path. In addition to archeological research, modern Heathens base their religion on several core texts: the Icelandic Sagas (histories of events in the tenth and eleventh centuries) and the Eddas, which contain prose and poetry tales of deities and heroes. Today's Heathens have a range of approaches to their religion, with some emphasizing strict historical authenticity, and others advocating innovations to respond to contemporary life. These positions sometimes split along theological lines. Atheist and agnostic Heathens may be more likely to see Heathenry

primarily as a way to honor one's ancestors, and so value historical accuracy the most. Polytheist Heathens who seek living relationships with the gods, in contrast, may be more likely to value flexibility, as they must accommodate insights gained from experiences of their deities.

RACE IN PAGANISM

Ancestry, race, and ethnicity are important to many contemporary Pagans, but they are especially charged subjects in Asatru and Heathen communities. Some Heathen groups consider themselves to be universalists: they believe that their religion is open to all who feel called to their deities and their way of life. For them, race is more cultural than biological; they may emphasize human beings' long history of migration and intermarriage and humans' common primal ancestors in Africa. Folkish Heathens, on the other hand, believe that ethnic ancestry determines the religion that is proper for a given individual or group. For these Heathens, Christianity is a foreign religion that must be rejected for the spiritual health of their people. They may also believe that one must be of northern European ancestry to practice Heathenry: only those with the proper blood ties will be recognized by the gods.

These theological differences have been the subject of bitter infighting between Heathen groups, with universalist Heathens considering folkish Heathens to be racist, whereas folkish Heathens accuse universalists of trying to destroy the world's ethnic diversity through melting-pot assimilationism. Most folkish Heathens insist they wish no harm to people of other races; they simply urge them to practice the religions of their own ancestors. A small minority, however, have ties with white supremacist groups and are hostile to racial minorities living in what they consider to be white nations.

Ancestral connections were also a large part of Wicca's original appeal. Gerald Gardner presented Wicca as a lost indigenous religion of western Europe and the British Isles—an alternative religious path to which British people (or, perhaps, English-speaking white people) had a legitimate ancestral claim. This paradigm framed Christianity as an oppressive foreign religion, and many early Wiccan converts saw themselves as embracing the religion of their slaughtered witch ancestors. Similarly, North Americans of Irish, Scottish, or other Celtic origin are often drawn to Druidry as a way to deepen ties with the lands that their parents or grandparents still consider to be home.

Because of this history, most Wiccans and Druids are people of European descent. Although there are no racial restrictions on either of these traditions, people of other races do not always find it comfortable to join Wiccan covens or Druid groves. Some white Pagans share their region's prejudices against Afro-Caribbean religious traditions, which Pagans of color may also practice. A black Wiccan seeker who has also studied New Orleans Voodoo may encounter fear from white Wiccans who associate Voodoo with bad horror films and sensationalistic media coverage. Even white Pagans who are somewhat educated about Afro-Caribbean traditions may still feel threatened by these traditions' magical ethics, which can involve spells for love, money, or revenge—forceful practices utilized by vulnerable people in the context of slavery and oppression.

In other cases, integrating a Pagan of color into a majority-white group may be uncomfortable not because of overt racial or class prejudice, but from a lack of experience in talking about race, class, and cultural differences. If a group cannot acknowledge differences

in its members' opportunities and social privileges, the resulting awkwardness may cause Pagans of color to feel misunderstood or even closeted.

TRANSGRESSIVE BODIES IN PAGANISM

Many Pagan groups struggle with issues of identity grounded in embodiment. Does ancestry matter in being a Pagan, Heathen, witch, or Druid? What makes a woman or a man? Who is a proper member of the group, and who must be excluded?

Some Pagans, however, find their identity in the cracks between these categories. In Heathenry, for example, *seiðr* is a magical practice emphasizing divination and prophecy. It is traditionally considered to be women's magic because it requires receptivity to the spirits, a state typically considered feminine. Men who practice *seiðr* may be seen as weakened, emasculated, or potentially homosexual—in other words, as not properly male. In Heathen communities, where gender roles are somewhat more conventional than elsewhere in the Pagan movement, gender ambiguity may be seen negatively. Others, however, find it potentially empowering. In *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic* (2002), Jenny Blain suggests that a male *seiðr*-worker has a “third-gender” or “queer” status. She states that in many traditional cultures, an in-between or marginalized status can grant magical power and bring one closer to the spirits and deities.

Polytheist spirit worker Raven Kaldera (1966–) would agree that a body that transgresses social norms is a source of both pain and power. Kaldera is transgender and disabled, two conditions that put him on the boundaries of mainstream society. His writings suggest, however, that he feels his position gives him unique spiritual insights. Rather than seeing gender as a binary across which women and men can barely communicate, as many people do, transgender, genderqueer, and other queer-identified people stand outside these binaries and may more clearly see the harmful restrictions that rigid gender roles place on individuals. To live with a disabled body also sets one apart from the opportunities and obligations that consume most people's lives; it can place one outside of the flow of ordinary social life and allow space for spiritual work, as well as special opportunities to encounter others in marginalized or disadvantaged positions. Kaldera sees speaking for marginalized or disadvantaged groups, especially for queer people, to be a central part of being a spirit worker. Many of his books address the special concerns of these groups.

Kaldera has also written extensively for Pagans on challenging subjects such as BDSM and possession. Many Pagans are accepting of light BDSM, such as bondage or spanking, as an enjoyable sexual activity; some Wiccans also use the BDSM technique of scourging with a soft leather flogger for trance induction. Kaldera's edited collection *Dark Moon Rising: Pagan BDSM and the Ordeal Path* (2009), however, explores the use of intense sensation and carefully controlled physical pain as techniques for consciousness-alteration and spiritual transformation. Echoing recent studies of the use of pain in world religious traditions, Kaldera argues that such techniques are extremely effective for reshaping the participant's sense of self, potentially in a positive and empowering direction.

Kaldera's *Drawing Down the Spirits* (2009, with Voodoo initiate Kenaz Filan) explores what the authors see as the rebirth of traditional possession work in the contemporary Pagan community. Light possession techniques are practiced in a number of Pagan traditions, including in Wicca, where the invocation of the Goddess onto the body of the priestess is called “drawing down the moon.” *Drawing Down the Spirits*, however, opens the possibility

of deeper states of possession such as those practiced in Afro-Caribbean traditions. In these traditions, ritual participants who are possessed embody the spirits through stylized dance and speech or through performing striking physical feats. Kaldera cautiously advocates for the exploration of trance possession techniques among Pagans in order to forge deeper relationships with deities. As with his work on BDSM, his writing on possession emphasizes the body as a key site of spiritual transformation and connection to divinity. (For an academic treatment of spirit possession, see Dawson 2011.)

THEORIZING PAGAN EMBODIMENT

Pagan traditions contain many different theologies of the body and materiality. Some maintain the mind-body or spirit-matter dualism that is common in Western society, believing they are of fundamentally different natures, but without denigrating the body or matter. For example, traditional Wiccans often see the body as the temporary vehicle of an eternal soul, although it is also a physical expression of that soul. They may also believe that the Goddess is herself the soul of nature. Because the spiritual is seen as the foundation of the material, Pagans who hold these beliefs may see qualities such as gender as stemming from the spiritual realm. Souls may be thought to be masculine or feminine. Similarly, Pagans who see the body and nature as infused with an erotic universal life energy may also see matter as an expression of spirit, though they may not emphasize the idea of individual souls. Many vitalistic therapies base their treatments on the idea that the body can become disconnected from or misaligned with life energy and become unable to properly channel it. In this paradigm, spirit is always in harmony, but matter is not.

This view is in contrast to the one held by many feminist witches, for whom the body is the foundation of spirituality. In this model, it is not the body or nature that is damaged, but the mind or spirit. For these Pagans, nature and the body are our teachers and sources of deep intuitive wisdom; by listening to them, they can lead us into divine connection. By coming into right relationship with the body, they believe, we can heal ourselves from the spiritual damage caused by our culture. In this view, matter and spirit may be seen as inseparable, an integrated whole, and mind-body dualism may be rejected entirely. This view is also often held by eco-Pagans who are inspired by Gaia theory. For Gaia worshippers, spirit may be seen as the consciousness that arises from a complex system.

Regardless of whether they see mind and body primarily as a duality or as an integrated whole, for Pagans of many traditions the body is a magical tool and a source of spiritual identity. The body may allow Pagans to access primal forces of creation; it may host visiting deities, or allow recognition by the deities of one's ancestors; through disability or pain, it may give access to alternative ways of knowing and make one into a witch, a spirit worker, or a shaman.

When studying Pagan theologies of embodiment, it is important to recognize these competing and overlapping narratives and acknowledge their cultural context. All these ways of approaching the body are *myths*: sacred narratives out of which people make meaning. Their truth for practitioners is spiritual, not scientific or factual, and they emerge out of a specific historical moment.

In this time, in contrast to a mere two hundred years ago, Westerners believe that sexuality is a core part of an individual's identity. We are struggling with competing theories

of gender, wondering if it is socialization, biology, or some mysterious combination of these and spirit that makes people women, men, or queerly other. Highlighting the racial tensions that divide us, our communities have been torn apart in the wake of multiple well-publicized police murders of young black men. And we are facing climate change, though it is yet unclear if we have the political will to act effectively. These present realities shape and inform Pagan beliefs toward embodiment, as well as the attitudes of the scholars who study them.

Contemporary Paganism continues to attract sexual minorities and other sexual dissidents away from mainstream religions. The result is provocative theology and experimental practice that is already making Pagans into excellent dialogue partners for queer Christians and progressive practitioners of other religions. Good scholarship on Paganism must facilitate critical thinking about how Pagans approach embodiment and contextualize their views in a wider cultural and historical framework. To fully engage contemporary Pagan traditions, scholars will need to bring both sophisticated critical theory and a clear awareness that the movement cannot be represented by Wicca alone.

Summary

Contemporary Pagan views on embodiment have been heavily informed by the British tradition of Wicca, particularly through priestess Doreen Valiente's powerful liturgy "The Charge of the Goddess." In the Charge, many Pagans find a reflection of their belief that materiality itself is sacred. Further, the Charge's assertion that all acts of love and pleasure are the rituals of the Goddess supports a progressive Pagan sexual ethics. Pagans' tolerance and even celebration of same-sex and multiple-partner relationships, people with alternative gender identities, and unusual sexual practices such as BDSM have attracted many sexual minorities away from mainstream religions. Sex magic—rituals exploring gender and sexuality for personal and social liberation—are also part of some Pagans' practices.

In addition to their generally progressive sexual ethics, Pagans also share attitudes toward nonsexual aspects of embodiment. Many Pagans, for example, employ ritual that engages all the senses and focuses on the body to create divine connection. Pagans also often see spiritual and physical health as a matter of living in right relationship with the environment, the human community, or the other-than-human persons found in the natural world. The conviction that the earth and all its creatures are holy drives some Pagans to environmental or social justice activism. These Pagans evaluate all aspects of life, from housing to agriculture to health care, for whether they allow the harmonious flow of life force.

Pagans also commonly center their spiritual identities on bodily experiences. Gender identity is important for many Pagans, with some embracing or rewriting traditional gender roles, while others explore what it means to exist outside the categories of woman and man. Some emphasize the ancestry that connects them to their religions, whether that ancestry is understood as a family inheritance or part of a larger group such as race or tribe. Finally, some Pagans utilize experiences of pain, illness, age, or disability as opportunities to alter their sense of self and deepen their spiritual or magical practice. Across traditions, Paganism is deeply marked by the positive religious significance it grants the human body.

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- Compass with Geraldine Doogue*. "Britain's Wicca Man." Dir. Mark Edmondson. 2013. This television documentary, presented by historian Ronald Hutton, looks at the twentieth-century origins of Wicca as a British new religious movement as well as at its contemporary practice.
- I Still Worship Zeus*. Dir. Jamil Said. 2004. Shot on location in Greece, this documentary profiles the political and legal discrimination faced by traditional Hellenic polytheists in that country.
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witches, Satanists, Goddess worshippers, and more. Its narration provides little context for the rituals and practices it documents, and some of the factual statements it makes are outright false. Nevertheless, the footage itself is rich and includes a number of influential Pagan figures: Margot Adler, Alex Sanders, Janet and Stewart Farrar, Selena Fox, Luisah Teish, Z. Budapest, and Olivia Robertson.

The Wicker Man. Dir. Robin Hardy. 1973. This horror film, released in the United Kingdom and United States during a time of rapid growth in the Pagan movement, was warmly received by Pagans and horror fans alike. Viewers appreciated the film for its compelling portrayal of a revived Pagan society and for its satirical treatment of mainstream authority. The film and its original soundtrack continue to be popular among Pagans today.